

# **THE GOSPEL CHOIR: COMMUNITY IN MOTION**

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## **Introduction**

Gospel music has always been part of my life in one form or the other. My childhood in Brantford, Ontario included many Gospel music performances but simultaneously included classical piano lessons. In my teens, I sang in our church choirs, played piano in our services and was involved in other Gospel music performances including touring with my immediate family as The Winston Johnson Family Singers. I studied classical music at McMaster University and after marrying in my twenties, my husband and I began a Gospel group called 'Sweet Sound' that toured and recorded for 12 years while I earned a living as a private music and classroom teacher.

In 1988, we co-founded the Toronto Mass Choir, a 35-voice Gospel choir that has been touring and recording now for over twenty-five years and I remain the principle conductor (Feyen, 2007). This is the choir featured on the title slide of the video. After 15 years teaching music at the elementary and high school levels, 10 years ago, I was hired in a tenure stream position at York University to teach full-time in the music department and also given the task of developing the first-ever Gospel music curriculum at a post-secondary institution in Canada. I developed two courses, the York University Gospel Choir and a studies course, 'The History of Gospel Music' and have continued to teach them over for the past ten years.

A simple definition of community is a social group of people whose members share a common cultural, historical and/or religious heritage (dictionary.com). As I think about all of the music making in my life over the past 35 years as a Gospel choir conductor, I prefer bell hooks' definition that "caring together is the basis of community life" (hooks, 171) for with this, one begins to grasp that community is not just who you are as a collective but what you do together. Gospel choirs are a living and unique representation of community.

## **Organization**

This major research project (MRP) recounts stories from my life through which I examine the larger question of the impact of Gospel music and in particular Gospel choir courses at the post-secondary level. After four separate introductory documents, the video presentation should be viewed.

A collection of fifteen personal and theoretical narratives in the form of prose, songs, poems, stories and quotes accompany the video presentation. These elements together will demonstrate that Gospel choirs create community even when the traditional ties of culture, history and religion are absent. This MRP is organized so that one views the video and the accompanying texts as one complete project. An indicator within the video footage introduces each new text. The video may be paused at these points in order to spend more time with each reading.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the people that have poured into this project with me and have patiently waited for this research project to come to light. First of all I would like to thank all of the students and gospel singers who have inspired me over the last 35 years of conducting gospel music. I've loved every minute of it!

I will be eternally grateful for my grad supervisor, Professor Joy Mannette and mentor and second reader, Professor Naomi Norquay who saw something in me that I never knew was there. Thank you so much for your encouragement!

While the idea of a video project was really Joy's idea, it is to Len White that I owe my heartfelt appreciation for working as hard as he did to complete this mammoth project on time. Thank you for all of your hard work and creativity.

My family were the ones who encouraged me to accept the challenge of completing this MRP and for this, I thank you. Jenna and Tara are a continual source of encouragement. Oswald, thank you for always being there for me.

My wonderful husband, Oswald and also Tara helped to proofread the many papers over this graduate journey and also helped edit this final MRP--no small task indeed. Oswald is great with all things technical and so to pull this off, I really needed someone in my corner. Thank you.

My parents, Winston and Doreen Johnson are responsible for continuing our multigenerational legacy for one more generation and for giving me such a rich heritage in gospel music. As former teachers themselves, I inherited their love for education and keen interest in young people. Thank you Mom and Dad!

My grandparents on both sides – Robert and Evelyn Johnson and Florence and LaVerne Jones all attended the little church that I grew up in and between them had 19 children. This was enough to give me over 100 cousins and counting!

The Drake Memorial British Methodist Episcopal Church in Brantford, ON and my family and friends that attended there are all totally responsible for my love of gospel music today. Thank you for loving me as I was growing up and giving me such great memories in these early Black churches, some of which are no longer standing.

The York University Gospel Choir has been a tremendous experience and I pray that those that go through the course will continue their love of gospel music for years to come. The Toronto Mass Choir continues to be the crown jewel of my accomplishments in gospel music to date. What a wonderful family of musicians!

And finally, I want to dedicate this project to my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ without Whom, I would not have a song to sing.

## **An Autoethnographic Study**

The problem of building community *within* post-secondary communities is an issue in which I have great interest. For many students, post-secondary institutions are a different world. In the opening paragraph to his chapter, “Worlds Apart: Disconnects Between Students and Their Colleges”, Levine states that “students come to higher education with particular needs, abilities, and wants, only to find a gap between what they are seeking and what colleges are offering” (2005, p 155). These ‘satellite’ students, as I will call them, seem to be ‘always circling and never landing’. The lack of a sense of belonging is often felt more keenly by first-generation students and students of colour in colleges and universities. “First-generation students are less likely to live on campus, to develop relationships with faculty members, and to perceive faculty as being concerned about their development; they also work more hours off campus (Richardson & Skinner, 1992: Terenzini et al, 1996 in Pike & Kuh, 2005). Post-secondary campuses, most often situated in larger Canadian cities, are often the first time that students find themselves face to face with others from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures.

The Gospel choir is, by its very nature, a place where people, whatever their background, can find community. As a Gospel artist and music educator, I have a vested interest in finding solutions. In order to address this concern, I want to take a close look at the many layers of my practice as a music educator

teaching Gospel music at a Canadian university. While I am also engaged teaching other music courses at York University, it is my development of Gospel music curriculum that has provided me with the most unique vantage point. I want to reveal my journey and personal reflections in order to convey my understanding of my lived reality in this pivotal period in the history of Gospel music in Canada.

Arts-based research, heuristic inquiry and self-study are employed in this digitally formatted audio/visual autoethnography. I have crafted stories from my own life, accompanied by video, photographic images and music, in an effort to understand particular phenomena in my teaching and to understand Gospel music's broader contributions to community building. "One characteristic that binds all autoethnographies is the use of personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experience" (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis, p. 23). I am an educator but first of all I am a musician. Music is the way in which I interpret my world and what I know about music and teaching is first found in my role as a singer/songwriter.

While my recollections provide a backdrop for the exploration of the broader challenges of arts education in our diverse world, the contrasts between the cultural and the personal are shaped as I change focus from looking backward and forward to inward and outward. At the centre of my audio/visual

autoethnographic study is my own self-awareness and the sharing of my experiences and introspections as a primary data source. Arts-based research is an effort to employ and emphasize the expressive qualities of generative forms of feeling “in order to enable a reader of that research to participate in the experience of an author” (Manovski, xvi).

To present my self-analysis, I used the tools of metaphor and expanding narrative to re-think and conceptualize parts of my professional life as a music educator and to chronicle and critique aspects of my teaching. Personal reflection is all about being willing to move through the kaleidoscope of memories that represent my teaching experiences and to transform them into learning experiences that shine a light onto sound pedagogical principles. In this way, this audio/visual autoethnography becomes a form of arts-based educational research.

The primary data source is stories from my life and it is in the intersecting lines of those stories where I have positioned my research. The themes discovered throughout my life’s work in Gospel music and music education figure prominently. It would be incomplete not to include the sights and sounds of Gospel music performance and so throughout this journey I have included images and video that best illustrate the themes of Gospel music performance and community that are tied to my own historical roots and my work with Gospel



choirs. I also provide contextual quotes and narratives that expand on the concepts and ideas introduced. Continual connections between what the theorists say with respect to Gospel music and what I know to be true inform the data collected for this autoethnographic project. Stacy Holman Jones reminds us that, "Telling our stories is a way for us to be present to each other, provides a space for us to create a relationship embodied in the performance of writing and reading that is reflective, critical, loving and chosen in solidarity" (Adams, Ellis & Holman Jones, p. 19). These narratives are moments in time that continue to illuminate the larger questions of inclusivity, identity and community both for me and for the students I teach.

My research could be seen as a way of 'decolonizing the academy'. In the book of the same name, Davies, Gadsby, Peterson and Williams (Eds.) contend that the academy is perhaps the most colonized space (2003). In addition, Linda Tuhiwai Smith in *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999) desires that indigenous peoples develop as researchers and advocates for a counter-story to Western ideas about the benefits of the pursuit of knowledge and a range of research methodologies. In order to engage the academy as researchers, we need to also be prepared to 'decolonize' our research methods.

In Cole & Knowles' book, *Lives In Context* (2001), they view "researching as an activity that is an extension of who we are as individuals" (p. 25). Many of the stories shared will also extend the limited research that has been completed

in the study of Gospel music in Canada. The pivotal role that I occupy in this journey of discovery will, undoubtedly, provide a springboard for future research into Gospel music and Gospel music education.

### **Why autoethnography?**

I am a storyteller, always have been and, I suppose, always will be. During my Gospel choir rehearsals, I make liberal use of stories, taking every moment to encourage the singers to put themselves inside the story of the song and to understand the context of the lyrics. When you are a conductor, it is important that choristers not just sing back to you the intangible but also try collectively to communicate the feeling of and meaning behind the lyrics. I am also a multi-generational Black Canadian, a description used to describe Black Canadians with, “a considerably longer historical presence in Canada and different cultural background than those of West Indian or Caribbean origin” (Smith et al., 2005, 349). Since Canada is a relatively new country, there are not many of its citizens that can say that their family tree in Canada has more than one or two generations except for, perhaps, the First Nations. The growth of the Black population in Canada began in the 1960s when the pathways to immigration from the Caribbean opened up. My family roots go back to the mid 1800s in Canada on both sides of my family tree, which is why I choose to identify myself as a multi-generational Black Canadian.

Scholars began writing and teaching about autoethnography in the 1990s (Adams, Ellis & Holman Jones, p. 10) and I have chosen to use this research methodology in the form of written prose and audio/visual presentation. “An autoethnography is written and recorded by the individuals who are the subject of the study....These multiple layers of consciousness contain the personal story of the author as well as the larger cultural meaning for the individual’s story” (Creswell, p. 73). Arts-based research uses media such as short stories, poetry, visual performance and music as windows into intimate autobiographical experiences and autoethnography is a form of arts-based research that validates the reality and relevance of performance art as a way of interpreting and analysing the world. “An autoethnography uses self as a starting or vantage point from which to explore broader sociocultural elements, issues, or constructs” (Cole & Knowles, p. 16). As I research how Gospel music and in particular, Gospel choirs are a conduit to creating community, I have found that the very powerful experiences that I have had and connections that I have made are from quite a distinct vantage point. My journey has been circuitous, but one in which I found a compelling way to tell my stories and to use them to analyse broader research questions such as why students are drawn to this Gospel Choir course. Autoethnography gave me space to reflect and consider how I think and the impact of the relationships that have shaped my experiences.

My research could not have been approached in any other way but an autoethnography simply because my life stories are the richest data that I have to explore the impact of Gospel choirs in Canada and, in particular, at the post-secondary level. Our programme at York University is unique in Canada. For Gospel music, an audio-visual approach is the best way to convey the depth of emotion within. The accompanying narratives or what Cole and Knowles refer to as “self-based, reflexive explorations of teaching and schooling” (p. 16) also provide access into the world of Gospel choirs – something that few Canadians have. “If an author experiences an epiphany, reflects on the nuances of that experience, writes to show how the aspects of experience illuminate more general cultural phenomena and/or to show how the experience works to diminish, silence, or deny certain people and stories, then the author writes autoethnographically” (Adams, Ellis & Holman Jones, p. 23). Autoethnographers connect culture to cultural practices. In the work that follows, my personal narratives include aspects of Black Canadian culture and the ways in which our stories keep us connected.

## **My Locatedness As Researcher And The Researched**

As a multi-generational Black Canadian woman, I occupy a space that is identified not only by geography, but also as an intersection in time and a crossroad between cultures. I grew up in Brantford, Ontario, a small mainly all-white small town in the 1970s. I grew up, in fact, in a community within a community. As the offspring of two multi-generational Black parents with long roots in Ontario, I am a rare breed. I can trace my mother's ancestry back to 1854 in Ontario and my father's side goes back to 1871 and each side came from the northern United States. Up until I was a teenager, I did not know many Black Canadians who were not related to me nor did I meet any other visible minorities until I went to university. I did not look like my neighbours or my school friends but I did not feel different on the inside. Canada is my home and my country of birth and in fact, the only country that my ancestors have known going back at least six or seven generations.

The Black community across Canada is actually not a community at all because it is very fractured. Regionally there are huge differences between the historic struggles of the pockets of Black people that live in cities such as Toronto, Halifax and Montreal. Our stories are, however, important to share precisely because they are our own. Talking about my history keeps it alive--a 'mouth to ear resuscitation', so to speak. Waves of immigration that flowed from the Caribbean and other areas began making their way to Canada, beginning in

the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There was not an immediate affinity for our newly arrived sisters and brothers. In my family, it took until the early 1980s when I became the first grandchild *not* to marry a White person. All of my cousins before me had either married a White Canadian or moved to the States and married a Black American. I had 'broken the mold' in Canada for my family and started another chapter in my own story, this time with a Jamaican twist.

For this major research project, I chose to use stories from my own experiences to examine the phenomena of creating community through Gospel choirs because these stories are rich with data. "Through the telling and re-telling of my story, I am able to reclaim, revise and rename my history so that I come to a new understanding about it" (Absolon & Willett, p 7). This new understanding provided a distinctive lens through which my research was conducted.

My children, in their 20s, are not as familiar with the tradition of spirituals as I was growing up. Our current friends and family are much more integrated and perhaps the pressing need to be cocooned in a smaller Black community was not as necessary for my children as they were growing up in Toronto, but they too, need to hear my stories. At times, the re-telling is unpleasant to remember, in particular, the feeling of 'otherness' and isolation even in large public spaces such as schools or stores. It is only by coming to terms with the angst that I feel about the horrific times that birthed these wonderful spirituals

that I can truly appreciate the profound gift of this music. We cannot allow other people to tell our stories. We must make sense of our own realities.

In examining the location of self in writing and research, Anishinabe woman, Kathy Absolon uses the words 'dismembered' and 're-membered' to describe what happened to her and her mother as a result of the patriarchal Indian Act legislation and then the more recent result of Bill C-31 (Absolon & Willett, 2005). These terms resonate with me as I think about the pulling apart of African tribes and families as a result of the slave trade and the creation of a wide African diaspora that spans our globe. A few years ago, I attended a lecture by jazz great Randy Weston who in 1977 had attended a Nigerian music festival, which drew artists from 60 cultures. "At the end, Weston says, we all realized that our music was different but the same, because if you take out the African elements of bossa nova, samba, jazz, blues, you have nothing...To me, it's Mother Africa's way of surviving in the new world" (Harlem Jazz Enterprises, 2015). Randy Weston's genius has intentionally been to marry African rhythms to jazz music. I had always felt disconnected from my African roots, but in that lecture, I heard for the first time how I could be forever connected to my African roots, and I wept.

Just as Aboriginal researchers keenly feel the responsibility to know their history, Black Canadians, especially those with long-time roots in Canada, must learn our history and through this critical exploration, own our stories. "Locating

self in research brings forward one's reality" (Absolon & Willett, p. 12). Gospel music helps me to reconnect and "re-member". I do not represent nor do I speak for all Black Canadians. The stories that I share are my own. Telling my story also situates me within another unexpected community—the Latin American tradition of testimonio (Smith, K.M., 2011), a rich vision of praxis in community and knowledge production. Indeed, telling my story has made the research process much more poignant and personal and decidedly so since as researcher and the researched, I am able to reclaim not only my heritage but also to propose a reconsideration of the place and importance of Gospel music wherever it is found in Canada.

### **The Role Of Spirituality In The Research Process**

As a child, I remember how it felt when I played the piano each Sunday under the watchful eye of my grandmother. I can even remember the smells of the old antique piano and the joy of being able to contribute in a grown-up way to our services. Because my introduction to Gospel music was exclusively tied to my experiences growing up in church, there can be no discussion for me about Gospel music that does not include a discussion of faith.

In 1921, the National Baptist Convention in America published a compilation of new songs and called it 'Gospel Pearls'. This was the first collection of "songs published by a black congregation using the term "Gospel"



to refer not only to the “good news” [found in the first four books of the New Testament] but to the new kind of song and singing that was stirring the nation” (Boyer, p. 42). The sound of Gospel music has gone on to influence so many other genres of Black music that, today, it is often only the words that give you a clue that you are listening to Gospel music. However, Gospel music is more than just the lyrics. It is the intention of the heart and the understanding of where this music comes from that provides the necessary context for an authentic Gospel performance. Gospel music is always about freedom: freedom to dance, freedom to express, freedom to move, freedom to be. It is the hope of freedom that drove its humble beginnings and, I would argue, the love of freedom that keeps it alive today.

It is the memory of my connection to the spiritual role of Gospel music that keeps my research process pure. For instance, for many musicians trying to perform Gospel music, freedom from print music is a scary thing. Print music had many layers of meaning for me growing up. I studied classical piano and prided myself on being able to sight read practically any music that was put in front of me. However, this was not a skill that I used much in church because while we did use some print music, it was the songs and sung testimonies that sprung up spontaneously from members in the congregation that I most remember. “Gospel singers produced what jazz musicians referred to as ‘head arrangements’ proceeding from their own feelings, from the way in which ‘the spirit’ moved them at the time” (Levine, L.W., p. 186). Improvisation or

interpreting the melody and words in your own way is the central feature of Gospel music.

I also clearly remember one of my most embarrassing moments. When I was about 14 years old, someone who knew I took piano lessons asked me to play “Happy Birthday” for someone at church. I couldn’t do it. I could play Beethoven, Bach and Brahms, but discovered without print music I was helpless. Being a Gospel musician means being able to play anytime, anywhere, in any key and for anybody. I became determined to learn to ‘play by ear’ – a necessary skill for Gospel music performance that I developed through sheer perseverance.

Eber Hampton, in his musings about research concluded that “memory comes before knowledge” (p. 48) and that research is about learning and not necessarily about the creation of knowledge, “Every person’s life contains experiences and memories of those experiences...and each memory gives me knowledge” (Hampton, p. 53). As I cast my mind back to my childhood memories of making music in my home church on Murray St., I remember playing hymns out of our Methodist hymnal. I have a very old edition of this hymnal sitting in its familiar space on my bookshelf. I pass by it several times a day, but until this research project, I had never really looked at it closely. Inside the first few pages, I learned when it was written, the composers included and other important information that a researcher should know. I was astonished to discover that it is a 1933 edition and, upon closer examination, discovered that it contains not only

hymns but also psalms, passages of scripture and passages with responses. Within its pages were captured both the familiarity and the discipline of the Methodist denomination.

When considering the question, what does a researcher have to contribute to his or her topic, according to Hampton, “We’ve got time, space, energy and spirit” (p. 47). Research is not a container just for tangible elements. Because we are alive, our feelings, emotions and spiritual selves are all part of what make us who we are as a researcher. The consideration of what we bring to the table must include our spiritual self. Without it, we cannot reflect or truly explore the ‘why’ of what we do. Hampton goes on to say that if research is to be helpful, we should consider why we are interested in the topic that we are researching. “We do what we do for reasons, emotional reasons. That is the engine that drives us” (Hampton, p. 52). We need to ask ourselves what is our motive for research. My motivation is my passion for Gospel music and Gospel choirs. For me, there can be no research about this topic without considering the role that spirituality plays in the research process.

***When I Raise My Hands*** – Karen Burke (2015)

When I raise my hands, I expect great things

When I raise my hands, I feel powerful

I know what I want to hear, I know I have their attention and we are one

When I see the light in their eyes, I feel powerful and I feel invigorated.

I feel free and yet I am connected

I am connected to their voices and all of the voices that have gone before

I am connected to the generations before me – musicians, preachers, sojourners in the faith

When I raise my hands, I wait for it...I wait for the sound...

It is the unmistakable sound of hearts beating as one and spirits united for one cause, one purpose...

Not knowing where my hands end and the sound begins, I coax the sound out of their bodies into the air

And there it remains, echoes...of past spirituals and freedom songs laden with hope and praise

When I raise my hands, I am giving praise to Him who gives me the strength to raise my hands

A reason to sing, a reason to shout, a reason to dance, and a reason to rejoice with my whole body and...when I raise my hands

I surrender and I give my all

When I raise my hands

## **A Gospel Choir course at York University? – Text #1**

York University Gospel Choir (YUGC) provides a bridge for students from all cultures and walks of life into the university and our music programme. York University's webpage for the Department of Music boasts that it is Ontario's only Faculty of Fine Arts (now the School of Arts, Media, Performance and Dance) with degree programs in at least 8 different mediums including music (2015).

In addition, one of the distinctions of York's music programme is that it not only offers traditional classical and jazz music studies, but it also has a commitment to offering world music courses such as Chinese orchestra, Indonesian gamelan and West African drumming. In a programme that boasts such depth and diversity, the unique courses that York University offers in Gospel music are fitting. Not only do they fit right in, but also the enrolment cap of 100 that is reached each year speaks to the popularity of the course and the broad appeal of this genre. If there is jazz music study at an institution, then a portal to the academic study of Gospel music already exists.

Music educators who are interested in teaching Gospel music often forget that while they, themselves, may not be as familiar with this genre, the diversity found in today's classrooms means that likely some of their students will be very familiar with Gospel music. To be sure, Canadian music educators have included traditional 4-part choral arrangements of spirituals for quite some time

now but how can we hope to perform authentically a spiritual like 'Steal Away' if our singers do not understand the context of this song and songs like it? Indeed slaves had to 'steal away' to their 'hidden churches' in order to express deepest emotions through song. These services in the 'bush arbors' were times of refreshing and community building. While they praised the Lord for surviving one more torturous day of slavery, their entire body was involved in their singing in what I term, 'whole body singing'. Slaves carried with them musical connections to their homeland that they married to a new language, a new experience and appropriated biblical themes.

What American researchers are finding is that learning Gospel music in a Gospel choir setting provides an experience that is very unique and empowering. "As a 'neighbourhood' constituted by a cultural exposure through communal effort, the choir course [...] establishes a place and creates a structure for bringing diverse groups of students together" (Dilling, 70). One other institution in Canada has learned the value of establishing a curricular Gospel choir in a Canadian post-secondary setting and its impact on students' sense of belonging. The Humber Music program, which undoubtedly has produced many of the most successful commercial and jazz musicians in the world, recently took up the challenge. After consultation and research, in 2013, Humber College began offering a Gospel choir course and last year, for the first time in that music department's history, this ensemble became open to non-music majors. The

[Humber Gospel Choir](#) has quickly become one of the largest performance ensembles in the history of its music program.

In a secular institution, one might conjecture that Gospel choirs might only be marginally supported or possibly even panned by a seemingly increasing secular generation. However, the numbers don't lie. When I began the York University Gospel Choir course (FA/MUSI 1556, 2556, 3556 and 4556) in 2005, this new ensemble began with one section of 20 students, who had originally signed up for jazz choir but stayed for this reconstituted and now new Gospel choir course. The following year, the enrolment in the York University Gospel Choir course shot up to 80 students and as we moved into our new Fine Arts facility and recital hall, we began hitting our enrolment cap of 100 students. 100-110 students have been enrolling each year and its complement, 'The History of Gospel Music' (FA/MUSI 3406) has also enjoyed a steady stream of upper year Music majors.

Margaret Dilling's raw look at the justification for having a Gospel choir course at a post-secondary institution *at all* notes that, for some, the presence of a Gospel choir course might be an opportunity to counter racism, "They learn about institutionalized racism in the songs that resist it in clever code and peaceful protest". (p. 70). Dilling's article also wonders aloud about whether or not the Gospel choir tradition can remain authentic in the sterility and secularization of a university campus. My own experience has shown that it is

exactly these factors that show the genius of this music in that despite challenges to the contrary, community persists. Even the usual disparities that exist in a traditional choir are diminished in a Gospel choir. The rote learning of the music means that students who may not have had the opportunity to learn to read music are, perhaps for the first time, excelling beside students who do. In 2015, YUGC is not only the largest performing ensemble in the music department, but it is the only ensemble that has two separate end of term concerts with near capacity or sell-out crowds each night.

Gospel music is not world music. It is an American invention. As pointed out, if jazz is offered as a course of study at a Canadian university, then a portal to the academic study of Gospel music already exists. The same rationale for including the academic study of jazz music exists for Gospel music. There is a unique performance practice and community building aspect associated with Gospel music that further validates its inclusion in educational institutions.



## **“I’ve Got A Testimony” – Text #2**

*As I look back over my life  
And I think things over  
I can truly say that I’ve been blessed,  
I’ve got a testimony*

Written by Tony Tidwell - “I’ve Got a Testimony” (1996) Saved Children/Meek Records (BMI)

Gospel music since its inception, and even further back to the development of spirituals by enslaved Africans, has always been about encouraging people and uplifting the soul. There is a saying that goes, “You can’t have a testimony without a test”. It is typical in Black church services to take the time to allow people to share their personal testimonies with each other. In my own small church, people would spontaneously stand to their feet and give God praise for bringing them through a special hardship or circumstance such as sickness or job loss. Testimonies were shared to encourage other people that were going through the same thing. It was another way to draw the community together and to remind each other that they were not alone.

One of the most prominent themes in gospel music lyrics is the theme of gratefulness and remembering. So much of the lyrics are written to remind both the audience and the singer that although things may look bleak now, things are going to get better. Slaves were taken from Africa and brought to the Americas and the further intentional separation of families and tribes added to the fear and isolation that slaves experienced. Many scholars believed, until recently, that

Africans, once stolen from their homeland, lost their memories of Africa and thus the ability to pass on their culture to future generations.

Lawrence Levine in his book, *Black Culture And Black Consciousness* argues against the notion that Africans were unable to maintain their cultural heritage in the face of slavery and that this particularly applies to West African cultures. “Though they varied widely in language, institutions, gods and familial patterns, they shared a fundamental outlook toward the past, present, and future and common means of cultural expression which could well have constituted the basis of a sense of common identity and world view capable of withstanding the impact of slavery” (p 4). The Black churches and arguably their music, helped to bring about common ground and give a voice to those who felt disenfranchised and hopeless. Arguably the same purposes can be evidenced today as Gospel music is used to unite an often broken community.

Spirituals are the synthesis of what happened when African culture collided with their new reality of being enslaved in the Americas. The influence went both ways and the rich cultural exchange established this unique musical expression. Levine quotes VÉVÉ Clark who says that the question “is not one of survivals but of transformations” and then goes on to say “We must be sensitive to the ways in which the African world view interacted with that of the Euro-American world into which it was carried and the extent to which an Afro-American perspective was created” (p. 5). Gospel music is the audible heir of

these transformations. The contrast of spirituals vs. Gospel music is expanded in Text #5.

### **The impact of a Gospel Choir Course – Text #3**

The impact of Gospel music has been felt all over the world and its most common face is the Gospel Choir. Its iconic sight and sounds remain imprinted in the minds of most people even if they have never had the opportunity to sing in a Gospel choir. In Patrice E. Turner's article, 'Getting Gospel Going', she notes that the familiarity surrounding Gospel music is growing more and more due to its commercial use in televised award shows, commercial ads and on the Internet (p. 62). Today's more diverse classrooms include students who have no knowledge of Gospel music and students who are steeped in its traditions.

Turner's article is typical of the 'how to' of Gospel music education that is more prevalent in academic journals. The other common theme, though, seems to be concerned with the reaction against Gospel music's religious content and its acceptance by school communities as in Sharon's Young's article, "The Purposes of Gospel Choirs and Ensembles in State Supported Colleges and Universities" (2005). Both Young and Turner's articles include the (American) Music Educator's National Conference's official stance concerning the performance of religious music in public schools which states that the "MENC believes that schools that repudiate the use of religious music deny students the

opportunity to engage in a comprehensive music education” (Turner, p. 63).

There seems to be no comparative policy in the Ontario Educational Curriculum pertaining to the use or avoidance of sacred music and I have found that it is largely the administration within the school that makes that call for their school community. In both Canada and the U.S., Gospel music meets many of the requirements for the teachable elements required in the public system and even more so in the Catholic system. “Young people enjoy the energy of gospel music and they can be taught to sing beautifully in this style” (Turner, 63). My own experience has shown me that when Gospel music and young people are in the same room, something very special takes place.

While Gospel choirs can be developed at any level of education, it is precisely the inclusive nature of Gospel music that makes it an ideal ensemble at the post-secondary level. Some might be sceptical at the appeal of a Gospel choir on a secular campus, but if there ever was an environment for the inclusion of a Gospel choir course offering, it is on our campuses of higher learning where we are to smash stereotypes and challenge unfounded fears and biases. In Linda B. Walker’s article, “Developing a Gospel Choir”, the benefits and rationale behind having a Gospel choir are explored and she also addresses the needs of and benefits to post-secondary students, “Through regular participation, students can develop musicianship, good choral techniques, and aural skills; they can also learn to use basic music terminology, sing in harmony, and identify basic form in music” (p. 24). Students learn repertoire by rote and the skills required to do this

are often under-developed in university ensembles such as orchestras or concert choirs that rely on print music.

The choir I lead, the York University Gospel Choir (YUGC) is a 100-voice performing ensemble that acts as an ambassador for the school and for the Gospel music genre in the broader community. It is not primarily a recruitment tool although this is definitely a recognized by-product of the appeal of Gospel choir music. The experience of performing music in a Gospel choir setting can be very appealing. The control of the group is almost entirely in the hands of the conductor and because of the chorister's focus and attention on the leader, even with a large body of singers, the performance possibilities are endless.

"Conductors are free to repeat, start at the top, lengthen or shorten the vamp, and so forth" (Walker, p. 27). In this way, no two performances are ever alike and the ensemble has the privilege and satisfaction of creating something dynamic and organic at every performance, together.

Walker also explores Gospel lyrics and declares them as valuable with a caution. "Although examination of gospel texts is valuable in understanding how to perform and interpret the music, remember that teaching a gospel choir is a musical exercise and is not the teaching of religion" (p. 26). This is where I differ in opinion from Walker. Gospel music is a faith expression and there is no denying that the most powerful performances that students will hear will be by performers who actually believe the words they are singing. At the post-

secondary level, where students are learning to be critical thinkers, to attempt to teach Gospel music divorced from its inherent faith component would be like trying to eat hot ice cream—all flavour and no substance! When discussing the Gospel text, one can share about what the song may mean to those who are familiar with Gospel music and/or Christian in the audience. Students at the university level need to know why Gospel music was created in the first place and the purpose and the intent of the composers and often the performers. York University's music department also offers a lecture series called 'The History of Gospel Music' to provide context for the appreciation of, and participation in, Gospel music.

#### **Gospel Choir Is Family (Story) – Text #4**

I make a point of learning every one of the 100 students' names that are registered in my Gospel choir course each year. The turn over each year is usually about 40% and so in those first few weeks, although it is a challenge, it is my privilege to learn their names and call them by name. If you want to turn a room full of people into a family, learn their names. Dale Carnegie was right! (How To Win Friends & Influence People, 1936).

In my classroom, we keep it real. Even though there are 100 students, if something wonderful happens to one of us, we make a point of celebrating together. Some students even share the rough times and their 'family' is there.

'Mary' was a quiet girl who kept mostly to herself that first year in the Gospel choir course, her gentle smile revealing a soft soul. The second year, she tried out for a couple of solo leads and, as it turned out, had quite a pleasant voice. I was very glad to see her return.

Mary was successful in getting one of the solo opportunities in our year-end concerts. At our Tuesday night dress rehearsal just before the big weekend performances, Mary came to me apologetically and said that she was sorry but that she wouldn't be able to make our final concerts. I was surprised because students must declare any concert conflicts to me weeks in advance. She said, "My father just died and the funeral is on Saturday". I was very shocked to say the least and asked when her father had died. She said, "This past Friday". "This past Friday?" I queried, "What are you doing here?" She said, "I didn't want to miss our last YUGC class. I really needed to be here". I couldn't believe it. I asked her if she minded if the choir members knew about what had happened to her father. I told her we were going to practice the song that she had the lead in and asked, "Do you still want to sing it with us?" "Yes", she said calmly.

I gathered the choir together and told them about the passing of Mary's father and the fact that she was here with us. The initial silence was deafening as we stood together and then we began to sing Mary's song. The song was,

[“Lean On Me”](#) (Kirk Franklin & the Nu Nation Project – 1998). The main chorus says:

I am here, you don't have to worry  
I can see your tears  
I'll be there in a hurry when you call  
Friends are there to catch you when you fall  
Here's my shoulder, you can lean on me

There were several teary eyes that afternoon, including mine. Mary sang her solo with a lot of emotion but a clear voice--it was truly a moving experience for everyone. On their own, the students decided to create a big card of condolences and have everyone sign it. They made arrangements to get the signed card and flowers to Mary. Now that's what I call family!

I have received several testimonials from students who have been part of the Gospel choir course during their time at the university. They would say things such as “Tuesdays are the best day of the week for me” or “YUGC is a family and I have to be there”. Here are a couple of testimonials from the end of our recent school year:

a) Hi Professor! I couldn't find you after the concert but I just want to say thank you so much for an awesome two days and all the work you have put towards YUGC during the past 10 years! Just after the rehearsal on Tuesday reminded me of how overwhelmed I used to be when I was a student at York. But I remember walking out of choir rehearsal every week feeling like a brand new person again. I think a lot of us choir members could say the same thing! Thanks again for another awesome night and for the 3 years I've been in this choir. I can't wait to see and hear what you have for next year!

b) The past 3 years have been amazing with #YUGC! Words cannot even begin to express how much I am going to miss the amazing group of people I got to



share my Tuesday's and the stage with. Every single one of you is special and so talented in your own way! Today was the last time I got to share the stage with you guys and I would not have had it any other way. We killed it like we always do! How many people can say they go to class to learn and have fun and leave with a family of 100+ people? Thank you for making my time at York more than I could have imagined. I love you all! #yorku #musicmajor #gospelmusic #squad

My colleague at an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) recently attended one of my York University Gospel Choir concerts. The Gospel choir that he directs at his school has been established as long as the school-- since the 1800s. His choir, however, is not as well supported and they do not sing a lot of Gospel music. After witnessing our concert, he had his own epiphany. He was impressed by the multicultural nature of York's Gospel choir. He was also affected by the sheer joy of these 100 choristers and the obvious recruitment potential of this type of choir. Who would have thought Canadians could teach Americans something about Gospel music education?

As I sit here working on this project, my inbox is filling up with requests from students who are anxious that they will not get one of the coveted seats in the Gospel choir. Sometimes, I can hardly believe how popular this course has become and the many surprise bonuses that have also developed. The strong sense of community, the strong sense of family, the sense of boldness for first time soloists, the development of musicians who love to play Gospel music...all of these things were as surprising to me as the rest of the school. Yet, why should I be surprised?

No matter where I go, when Canadians hear Gospel music, they love it! The opportunity to witness students' transformation from Gospel music neophytes into Gospel choir champions continues to be an amazing journey! I reflect on my own role in this—as pedagogue designing and putting an experiential, loving pedagogy into action and hope that other colleges and universities in Canada will look more closely at including Gospel choir as part of their course offerings.

### **From Spirituals to Gospel Songs – Text #5**

Many community and school choirs will include what they term as Gospel music in their repertoire when in fact they are singing spirituals or choral arrangements of spirituals. Songs such as *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* and *I've Got a Robe* were spirituals that I learned by rote as a young girl from my parents and extended family. We clapped and stamped our feet on the wood floors and shouted “Amen” and “Hallelujah” in response to the messages in word and song. My church experience growing up captured the duality that existed beginning in the 1920s between the solo and choir music sung in storefront churches and the music sung in the larger, more established old-line churches, particularly in the northern states where my ancestors came from, “The music of the Holiness churches first penetrated the established denominations through the storefront Baptist and Methodist Churches that grew rapidly in the urban centres whose

black migrants found the older and larger churches unresponsive to their needs” (Levine, L.W., p. 181).

In any one of our services we could be found singing out of the hard-covered black, ‘The Methodist Hymnal’, a formal collection of great hymns including those written by the great Methodist preacher and hymn writer, John Wesley. But we also sang spirituals (without the use of print music) and out of ‘The Songs of the Gospel’ -- the ‘little blue book’ as it was affectionately called. We made space in our worship services for whatever format fit at that time with no feeling of compromise or tension between them. It was the spontaneity and rhythmic pulse of the spirituals and Gospel songs that stayed with me most, keeping me connected to my Black musical heritage. It is extremely important that the teaching and singing of spirituals continues because of the important historical context that they provide and for what they reveal to us about the antebellum and post-slave experience. These texts were often inspired by Old Testament stories that slaves would have been exposed to through churches or camp meetings. Spirituals were not only used for religious purposes but also filled with double meanings for the purpose of communication. “Many signals and messages were sent via spiritual codes...in most instances the decoded message implied escape mechanisms” (Hillman, p. 23). For example, a song such as ‘Wade In The Water’ might on the surface been understood to be about the theme of baptism when at the same time, it could be a directive to an

escaping slave to take to the water to throw off his scent from the dogs chasing him.

The call and response nature of spirituals and the stolen moments for worship and singing together provided opportunities for slaves to build community even though this concept threatened the control of the plantation owners. At the end of a long day, slaves would gather together and sit and sing outside of their cabins or meet in their 'invisible churches' or 'hush arbours' for more exuberant times of singing and dance muffled by quilts and buckets filled with water to dampen the sound. "Gospel songs displaced spirituals as the most important single body of black religious music from the 1930s on" (Levine, L.W., p. 174). There are a number of things that spirituals and Gospel songs share in common but one thing is that in both, "God was an immediate, intimate, living presence" (Levine, L.W., p. 174). It is the nature of Gospel songs to be encouraging and, like spirituals, the themes are themes of hope and encouragement.

If spirituals had Old Testament themes, Gospel songs took on more of the New Testament themes of salvation and personal testimony. "The name 'gospel' was assigned to these songs because many of the texts were derived from the first four books of the New Testament" (Harris, p. 172). Within these books is included the main teachings of Jesus which are connected to the doctrine of salvation by grace. Thomas Dorsey and his music, beginning in the 1920s,

embodied much of the new personal outpouring associated with the New Testament that came to characterize Dorsey's songs (often called 'Dorseys') and the music of Gospel songwriters after him. Dorsey's masterpiece, 'Take My hand, Precious Lord' demonstrates within it this new reflective and personal performance practice and his blues influence allowed him to do through these new Gospel songs what he did so well which was to elicit "a collective response through the declaration of his personal feelings" (Harris, p. 186).

"Gospel songs included few songs about the Old Testament heroes and few songs portraying victory in this world" (Levine, L.W., p. 176). "Jesus, rather than the Hebrew Children, dominated the gospel songs" (Levine, L.W., p. 175). Another distinct difference was the addition of instruments to Gospel songs in contrast to the largely a Capella renditions of spirituals. The rhythms, format and instrumentation of these new Gospel songs were often indistinguishable from the blues and ragtime songs that influenced these early Gospel music composers such as Thomas Dorsey, considered to be the 'The Father of Gospel Music'.

Each successive generation marries Gospel lyrics to musical styles that keep their sound relevant to the ears of newer and younger audiences. At the same time, Gospel music has influenced and continues to influence Black music in general, not only in form, but also by giving the world great singers such as Aretha Franklin, Whitney Houston and Jennifer Hudson. As in the early days of Gospel music pioneers, Thomas Dorsey and Mahalia Jackson, there has always

been some push back from the Black church-at-large as contemporary styles gain eventual acceptance in Gospel communities. For example, when Kirk Franklin came out with 'Stomp' in 1996, he borrowed from the hip-hop sounds of that era and it was considered by many in the church to be very controversial. But today a cultural fusion has taken place and Kirk Franklin's music is not considered by the Gospel community to be particularly avant-garde.

Gospel music has traditionally been the music that reflects the collective thought of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Black America such as the Civil Rights Movement. The repertoire that I use in the York University Gospel Choir is chosen carefully to provide authentic Gospel music that has been or is accepted by the broader Gospel music community. I also showcase important Gospel music composers of our times and try to provide a window into the Black Gospel community.

Spirituals used the themes of freedom, the lack of it and the hope of a better tomorrow. The religion of the Gospel songs recognized similar themes, but "its immediate solutions tended to be a mixture of Christian faith and one variety or another of positive thinking" (Levine, L.W., p. 176). In North America, the concept of a lack of freedom is very hard for its mainstream citizens to grasp. The themes of justice and hope are still there but now Black America has the 'right' to hope and this confidence and ownership of personal freedom is what provides so much of the joy that characterizes today's Gospel choir music. While, as an educator, I pay homage to spirituals and often teach anthemic

arrangements of spirituals, it is contemporary Gospel choir music that I use most often when I teach in schools and present community workshops.

### **Gospel Choirs: The Sound of Disruption – Text #6**

Gospel choirs are nowhere and everywhere. They can be seen in the most interesting and disparate places and one might even go as far as saying that they have been appropriated for commercial gain. On American award shows, they appear on hydraulic lifts in the inevitable grand finale or are featured in car or clothes detergent commercials. In Canada public, Gospel choir performances are not as easy to find as they are in America, but this adds to the force of their impact here. For most Canadians, the sounds and sight of a performing gospel choir is such a rarity that it could be viewed, as what Walcott describes, as a “disruption” (p. 48). If disruption has a sound, it could be the sound of a Gospel choir.

Gospel choirs alter the mainstream paradigm every time they appear in Canada, whether in a school, on Canadian radio or in an outdoor music festival. Perceived as a construct, White Canadians often place Gospel music, when encountered, in the category of ‘other’ or world music when it actually shares the same roots as jazz, blues and ragtime (Hillman, p. 81). Gospel Choirs are perceived as ‘Black’ even though, in the case of those on university campuses, they are quite diverse. Gospel choir performances are closer to Canadians than

they think; primarily through the media but if one dares to look closely enough, also in performance.

In his collection of criticisms on Black Canadian Culture, Rinaldo Walcott states that it is his contention that “when Blackness works to elaborate Canadianness it simultaneously unsettles Canadianness. That is, Blackness interrupts ‘Canadian’ scenes and simultaneously sets the stage for particular and different enactments of Canadianness” (Walcott, pp. 37). The presence of a Gospel choir course at a Canadian college or university is definitely a departure from the traditional choir offerings found at most post-secondary institutions. Consider Teelucksingh’s work on claiming racialized spaces in Canada (p. 15). When Canadian Gospel choirs perform here, they are literally laying claim to a new space. In addition, the spiritual nature of the songs that are sung in secular settings could also be viewed as ‘unsettling’. Such is the case when the York University Gospel Choir is invited to sing at a provincial educators’ conference or when the Toronto Mass Choir performs at the Toronto Jazz Festival.

Walcott describes any ‘Black’ work that takes the main stage in a Canadian space as “disruptive” (p. 38). If that disruption has a soundtrack in Canada, it would be the sound of a Gospel choir and here is why. The Gospel choir stands at a crossroads of culture in which old meets young, Black meets White and traditional meets contemporary. It stands alone as a formidable audio/visual personification of everything that Gospel music is: powerful,



energetic and uplifting. Gospel choirs in Canada run counter to the more restrained and classical choral tradition that regularly fills Canadian concert halls and is taught in our schools.

When a Black American Gospel choir takes the stage in Canada, it is a rarity but well received. But it is still not *us*. In Canada, it is our diversity that shapes our acceptance of and participation in Gospel choirs. Our Canadian history also gives Canadian Gospel music its own sound. As Dr. Joan Hillsman's 1998 book implies, Gospel music is seen as an African American art form, but there is emerging a distinctively Canadian Gospel music identity. Canadian Gospel musicians are much more influenced by their Caribbean roots and jazz music than are our American counterparts.

The Black Canadian community is also quite diverse and so are our educational institutions, especially those situated in major cities. "In Canada, Black communities proliferate, constituted of continental Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, Black Canadians and others who share certain histories..."(p. 43). The fact is, it is this diversity that makes it difficult for one to imagine a Black community on any kind of a national scale, beyond the persona of Blackness that is an imposed construct.

In the U.S. there is a national Black community that is able to support large institutions such as the NAACP (The National Association for the

Advancement of Colour People) and BET (Black Entertainment Television).

These organizations, because of their size and pre-eminence, are able to support Black interests. I wonder aloud if there is any correlation to the proliferation of Gospel choirs in the U.S. and the strong voice of the Black American community? One might ask the question, which comes first, the community or the music, but my experience has shown me that any intentions to purposefully build community encourages the same bonds that need to be present to make great Gospel music.

### **The Gospel Choir = A Place To Belong – Text #7**

For many students, the university campus may be the first time that they come face to face with others from different races, religions, sexual orientations and cultural communities. Statistically they will flounder if they do not find points of connection and communities of belonging (Albert, 2010, p. 1). Access to post-secondary education has increased since the end of World War II and there has been widening participation resulting in bigger classes and shaping everything from faculty engagement to the delivery of curriculum. “Universities are maximizing revenues by cramming as many students as possible into lecture halls, which increases the student to teacher ratio” (Freeman, 2009). Freeman goes on to say that “Ontario universities have the worst student to teacher ratio in the country” (2009) and the resulting imbalance places undue pressure on both students and faculty.

It would be unwise for professors to ignore the diversity of the students in their courses as they consider how to craft and deliver curriculum that will motivate and inspire (although this is not something always consciously considered by traditional academics). The role that professors play in a student's journey to completion is crucial and just as much pride should be given to seeing students graduate as evaluating the size of the incoming classes each year. As a result of government and institutional efforts, "[universities] have begun to perceive a relatively homogenous group of students as a more multi-cultural population, wider age groupings and different experience levels who have had a significant impact on retention strategies" (Albert, 2010, p. 3). In addition, the increasing number of international students on campus begs the need to address issues of integration, language and cultural understandings that, in their own way, affect retention.

Canada is approaching widespread access to post-secondary education. "Over 60% of Canadian adults have some form of post-secondary education" (Shanahan, 2014). Not only is there expanded access to post-secondary education in Ontario, it has become increasingly accessible to a wider and more diverse body of students. However as environmental and social factors continue to shift, retention, simply defined as completion of the qualifications for a degree, has become an important focus for Ontario universities. This focus drives the search for innovative solutions and because there is evidence in American research that Gospel choir courses improve a student's sense of belonging,

particularly for students historically underrepresented by race (Pope & Moore, 2004; see also McCrary, 2001; Young, 2005), it is prudent to explore the impact of a Gospel choir course at a multi-racial Canadian university.

In Pope & Moore's article, "The Afro-American Gospel Choir: Achieving a Positive Campus Climate for African American Students", they describe the Gospel choir at the University of Alabama and its role in providing a more positive campus climate for African American students. While the focus of this article is on African American students, the results of their survey, which asked students their reasons for joining the choir, echoed many of the same reasons that I hear from my own students in the York University Gospel Choir, which is very multicultural. Most of the participants in the study mentioned the social benefits of being involved in the choir. They noted that the choir provided its members an opportunity to come together twice a week in a 'family away from home' (p. 87).

Access and student retention are challenges for our increasingly diverse Canadian campus communities and students and especially those new to the university experience, often do not make the connections necessary for them to persist until graduation. Initial proactive campus strategies have included creating 'neighbourhoods' such as living-learning dorms. This institutional response needs to be extended beyond the first year experience. Gospel choirs could be considered another form of this 'living and learning together' approach.

Vincent Tinto has promoted the idea of learning communities as a way of facilitating student engagement—both academically and socially. According to Tinto, student entry characteristics directly affect the likelihood of students' experience in post-secondary education. These entry characteristics influence their initial level of commitment to the institution and the higher the student's initial commitment to the institution, the greater his or her level of engagement and consequently the level of student success (Jones, 2008, p 16). Courses such as a Gospel choir are an example of the type of innovation in curriculum offerings that can help student retention and their pursuit for a place to belong. This has particular implications for 'commuter' campuses like York University.

### **What's Love Got To Do With It? – Text #8**

The old African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child" has become a popular adage for those of us entrusted with the 'care and feeding' of the next generation. What must be remembered is that the loving way in which that 'village' pours into a child will come back ten-fold if that child also discovers his responsibility to give back to that community. As educators, we have the privilege of encouraging our students to aspire to their highest potential and to vision beyond the obstacles that may be placed in their way. Our responsibility as educators must go one step beyond by understanding that this guidance not only needs to impact the life of this young person but also the community in which they live. Some call it social justice, others call it democratic education and some call it love (hooks, 1994, 2003).

My own twenty plus years as an educator at the intermediate, high school and finally the university level, confirmed for me the value in 'declaring and daring' young people to step into their roles as caring adults in their communities. The goal of helping all young people, but especially those who feel the most disenfranchised, to find their place in our evolving society includes the challenge of engagement and empowerment, but it is worth the struggle:

The process, then is not about rescue; it's about empowerment. When critical theorists talk about empowering their students, they are talking about helping them to attain mental freedom and to develop skills necessary to make their voices heard. Empowerment means helping others attain genuine power over their own choices and lives. (Hinchey, 1998, p. 138)

As educators, we have the opportunity to encourage hopefulness and empowerment, especially to first-generation and students of colour. bell hooks' branding of the educator as an agent of hope sheds light on the question of what we can do to influence young people not only to combat feelings of inadequacy but to be over-comers in a system that is often stacked against them. When love is the motive, physical, political and cultural boundaries cannot stop the learning process. If the desire to share a legacy of hope and social justice is at the core of the educator's heart, then education becomes more profound than just the sharing of information. hooks quotes Parker Palmer who says:

Education at its best--this profound human transaction called teaching and learning--is not just about getting information or getting a job. Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world (hooks, 2003, 43).

Caring communities cannot be built without intention and love has everything to do with it. In “Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope”, educator bell hooks, bravely goes where others fear to tread and introduces the “L” word in Chapter 11, ‘Heart to Heart: Teaching With Love’. hooks writes, “Teachers are not therapists. However, there are times when conscious teaching - teaching with love - brings us the insight that we will not be able to have a meaningful experience in the classroom without reading the emotional climate of our students and attending to it.” (hooks, 2003, 133). Students need to know that we care about more than their scholastic ability. When our teaching flows out of a place of love, our students may feel safe and will, in turn, be inspired to reach out to others and become caring community leaders who repeat the cycle.

### **Gospel Music Workshops – Here And Around The World (Story) Text #9**

For me, providing access to Gospel music through workshops has always proved to be an effective tool. These workshops invite participants to have an intense and in-depth experience with Gospel music. They are invaluable short-term commitments that provide helpful information and/or instruction, in areas of speciality, like Gospel music, that wouldn’t normally be accessed by the general public. I enjoy providing workshops for schools, churches and other community organizations in Canada and abroad. This is why I created ‘Power Up’, a Gospel music workshop weekend offered annually in Canada by the Toronto Mass Choir each February and now in collaboration with and located at York University.

Gospel music performances, although very common in the United States and other English-speaking countries such as England and Jamaica, are not as common in Canada. Gospel music has, however, managed to carve out a strong presence in countries such as Japan, Korea and even Poland. Canada is far behind in terms of the points of access to Gospel music for its citizens. Most of the performances and workshops that I present in Canada are for audiences that have not previously witnessed a live performance of Gospel music.

The knowledge of Gospel music in Canada is reduced to what might be broadcast on American television or featured in popular movies such as 'The Blues Brothers' (2000) or the iconic 'Sister Act' (1992), which features Whoopi Goldberg disguised as a nun bringing the sounds of Gospel music to a conservative nunnery. 'Sister Act 2', the equally popular sequel (which ironically came out in the summer of '93 just before I started teaching high school music), shows Whoopi's character, 'Sister Mary Clarence' at it again, motivating the apathetic and saving a school from ruin by creating an amazing Gospel choir. More recently, it is popular media and *not* more conventional media, such as radio, which seems to have helped spread the energy and joy of Gospel music worldwide. In Poland, whenever there are workshops that teach how to sing like the nuns in 'Sister Act', people flock to them in the hundreds.

The Pro Novis Foundation and Gospel Joy (Gospel choir) were both founded in Poland in 2003. They set about accomplishing new milestones in



Poland including recording a Gospel music DVD and putting together the biggest Gospel workshop choir in Poland's history with 1020 voices. The workshops that this team regularly present all over Poland welcome hundreds of singers eager to learn more about singing Gospel music in mass choir settings. From the very beginning, Gospel clinicians from England and subsequently from the U.S. were invited to come and teach Gospel music to these large workshop choirs. The reputation of my choir, the Juno award-winning Toronto Mass Choir (TMC), TMC's annual Power Up Gospel Music Workshop and my work at York University attracted the attention of the Pro Novis organization in Poland and in 2006, I was the first conductor invited from Canada to be a guest clinician at their workshops.

I would arrive on a Friday afternoon and immediately be driven to rehearse with the musicians. These were often jazz musicians who bring their considerable musicianship and similar musical language to support the Gospel choir experience. On that first night of rehearsals, we would introduce about five or six of the songs and over the weekend, I would work in conjunction with a second conductor to teach about ten songs in total, all of which would be performed before a live audience on Sunday afternoon.

Armed with only the repertoire that I would teach through an interpreter in English by rote, the knowledge of how to say only 4 Polish words ("water", "please", "great!" and "hello") and the love of teaching, I would teach Gospel

music in three separate sessions over Friday, Saturday and Sunday morning. The team I work with would take the time to teach them the meaning of the words so that they could understand the meaning and context of the lyrics as much as possible. They were incredibly organized, having all of the words in English for them to read, red sashes for them all to wear so that they could feel unified, a stellar band and always 'standing room only' concerts.

The predominant demographic of the workshop participants is university/college age. Most of the workshop participants have a basic knowledge of the English language and practice their English by speaking with me and making an effort to get to know me better. I came to understand that "To be Polish is to be Catholic" and vice-versa. There exists within Poland a climate of respect for God but they are very wary of anything Protestant. But Gospel music has an appeal that crosses cultural barriers and, in this case, also traverses theological differences.

I returned to Poland in 2007, working with choirs of 400-500 people each time. I was treated like a rock star with every break filled with autograph seekers and picture-taking. In their limited English, these young people would ask great questions. Sometimes the questions were about music, but often, the questions were just about life. Before my eyes, a community of singers would be born in just a few short days. There was such joy and excitement!

I remember that concert in 2007 when we had sung our last song and the sweat was pouring down our backs. My colleague and I were out of breath from the excitement of 400+ energized young adults singing their hearts out. I came off the stage expecting the concert to be over. But the choir didn't follow—they were still dancing and jumping on stage so long that I had to go back out and conduct another song and then another. It was truly an unbelievable experience and definitely hard to put into words. With today's technology it is much easier and faster to post these experiences but back then, I could only testify as to what I had seen. Words, in this case, were definitely inadequate.

Gospel music is always about freedom – freedom to express, freedom to move, and freedom to worship! It is and always has been about the yearning for freedom all the way back to its very inception. It seems that in Poland, their affinity for God-honouring music and their search to experience personal freedom have taken them on a journey which has led many to Gospel choir music-- freedom personified!

When I came back to Canada, it was very hard to describe what had happened in such a short span of time over in Poland. No one here could grasp the sheer joy, exuberance and just plain stamina of these young people. I believe that it is because we take our freedom in Canada for granted and for Poland it is a relatively new concept. Our worship experiences in North America are often very joyous celebrations. But in Poland, the religious music experience

in general is anything but boisterous and yet, the popularity of Gospel music in the context of these workshops is undeniable.

In 2008, I returned with the entire Toronto Mass Choir (TMC) and our musicians, on a 12-day tour, travelling over 3000 km across Poland providing concerts with the young Polish Gospel choir, 'Gospel Joy'. Each member of our team took time off from work to travel to Poland for this experience. We not only took 25 of our own members, but we also invited twelve university students, including 9 from the York University Gospel Choir, to come along with us to Poland. What a tremendous opportunity for these Canadian students to meet Polish students who also loved to sing and perform Gospel choir music? After this experience, some of these same York students ended up joining TMC as full-time members.

During our time in Poland, we were able to mentor the fledgling Gospel choir, 'Gospel Joy'. The tour was immensely popular with audiences in the thousands clamouring for more as evidenced by the many encores! Best of all, we were able to help plant the seeds which have helped to nurture 'Gospel Joy' into the powerhouse Gospel artist that they are today with several albums and DVDs to their credit, two tours to the U.S. and an anticipated tour to Canada.

The Polish team continue to offer workshops and a summer camp and have also started 'Gospel Joy for Kids' which provides, for children, similar

experiences learning Gospel music. In 2011, Pro Novis decided that they wanted to offer other workshops in musicianship along with the mass choir experience, similar to what TMC does in Canada annually with 'Power Up'. In response to their request, I brought a team of 7 additional clinicians to Poland in November of 2011 to offer the first ever 'Power Up Poland'. It was a resounding success and had a mass choir of 500 singers plus a children's choir of about 200. This was the first time that my colleagues in Canada had the opportunity to witness first-hand what I had been trying to explain to them since I first went to Poland in 2006. They were totally amazed at their musicianship, energy and total love for Gospel music.

One of the most amazing sights to see were nuns in full habit, standing on pews and dancing for everyone to see. This is something that we would not likely see in Canada. I had the opportunity to speak with many of the young people and even some of the Sisters during these major Gospel music workshops in Poland. 'Gospel Joy' has been working on translating several Toronto Mass Choir songs into Polish and have plans to record a live album of this material. As one might imagine, creating original gospel music is a challenge for a new Polish gospel choir but they are determined to break new ground for Gospel music in Poland.

In 2012, the Toronto Mass Choir travelled to Romania and presented 'Power Up Romania' for about 200 people. Romania does not have the

infrastructure for Gospel music that Poland presently has, but they were no less enthusiastic and enthralled with Gospel music. I consider it an honour and a privilege to be involved with introducing and teaching Gospel music overseas.

### **The Gospel Choir: Community in Motion – Text #10**

From my earliest memories of performing Gospel music as a child growing up in my small church through to establishing the Toronto Mass Choir, teaching Gospel music workshops and creating Gospel music curriculum at the university level, the one consistent outcome has been the sense of community that is created. There are several historical facts about the performance practices of Gospel music that make it well suited for building community (Peck, 1998).

Gospel music evolved from spirituals that came directly out of the experience of Africans that were uprooted and brought to the Americas as slaves, beginning in the 1600s. During this time they lost their freedom, their families, their names and furthermore, slaves were separated from those that spoke their native languages and forbidden from talking to each other by their overseers. They were, however, allowed to sing while they worked and these songs were important for building community and creating a sense of belonging in a foreign land.

Spirituals make use of practices such as ‘call and response’ where the ‘caller’ spontaneously raises a song and is encouraged and validated by the response of those around them. In Lawrence Levine’s work, *Black Culture And Black Consciousness*, he explains that, “Where slave spirituals were almost always performed antiphonally by the entire congregation, Gospel music was frequently marked by solo and choir singing with the majority of the congregation in the role of audience—a role that did not really exist in slave religious music” (p. 187). Solo performance in the context of Gospel music does not mean that the audience becomes a silent observer, as is the convention in classical music performances. On the contrary, it is very common to hear shouts of affirmation from the audience members while the performer is singing. The performer or performers (in the case of choirs) encourage and respond to exuberant audience participation and in this way, there is a strong sense of community created.

Music educators will have to traverse a behemoth gap in music history if they fail to acknowledge the place and validity of spirituals and Gospel music in their repertoire and music history lessons. Thank goodness for Black History Month (February) which provides a reminder to acknowledge the important contributions of Black cultures to the world. Gospel music is worthy of academic study in Canada and valuable in an educational institution because:

- It is purposefully uplifting from its inception
- It helps to develop musicianship—especially auditory skills
- It is packed with historical and cultural connections
- It is ‘whole body singing’ with unapologetic repetition and deeply emotional expression

- It 'levels the playing field' because one does not have to read music in order to enrol
- It provides community and is a doorway to the African American experience, past and present
- It can be a personal response to everyday life's ups and downs
- It is no longer just the purview of North America but has active pockets of interest in countries such as England, the Caribbean, Poland, Japan and Korea

There are many practical and beneficial reasons for music educators to encourage the study and performance of Gospel music, not the least of which is that, for the most part, it is not written down. This means in order to learn it and to understand it, you must listen. Learning the music and lyrics by rote ensures that singers are focussed and purposeful listeners. It does not matter what kind of music you are conducting, every choral director wants singers who listen to each other! And every student, especially at the post-secondary level, has a need to belong.

Jan McCrary examines the *"Good" and "Real" Reasons College-Age Participants Join University Gospel and Traditional Choral Ensembles*. This article is a fascinating comparison not only of the reasons that students join either a Gospel choir or a traditional choir, but it also separates 'good' reasons such as a desire to learn more about the music from 'real' reasons which includes the social contexts of their musical experiences and how the music makes them feel when they are participating (McCrary, 2001). My anecdotal evidence, from over the past ten years teaching a Gospel choir course at York University is that it is generally a recommendation from a friend that gets them in



the course, but it is how the music makes them feel that keeps them in the course year after year. Many students, because of their unfamiliarity with the genre underestimate the personal impact of the music and the often long lasting relationships that are formed. McCrary concludes that while music participants join music ensembles for 'good' reasons...they like and tend to stay in the ensembles for 'real' reasons. In my experiences, those students that are most open to learning about the music will be drawn to the aesthetic experiences, but ultimately it is the experience of making music together in such an intimate way that keeps Gospel choir members connected to the music and to one another.

Universities, especially larger universities, invariably become entities unto themselves. Students often live on campus and spend much of their waking hours in transit and on campus going to classes and doing what they have to do to make it through. Universities strive to be communities *within* communities that invite students to step out of their comfort zones and to think critically about the world around them. But often, students are bewildered and feel like they don't belong. One of the benefits of a Gospel choir course offering is that not only is it resourced as other music ensembles are, but the very inclusive and uplifting nature of Gospel music makes it a great vehicle to build community for students who are struggling to make connections.

Much of the research that has been conducted on Gospel choirs is in connection to American universities. While in close geographic proximity,

Canadian and American realities surrounding historical connections to Gospel music and the average person's familiarity with the Gospel genre is very different. It would be interesting to see the results of similar research conducted at a Canadian university with regard to these communities in motion.

### **The Power Of Your Story (Poem)**

When you have a name, you have a story...

When you have a story, you have something to share...

When you have something to share, you can make connections...

When you can make connections, then you have hope...

And when you have hope, you have freedom.

- Karen Burke (2014)

"Names are the sweetest and most important sound in any language."

- Dale Carnegie, How to Win Friends and Influence People

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